

Education: Perceiving the Disease and Prescribing the Remedy

Rodney H Clarken

School of Education, Northern Michigan University

Paper presented at the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters
Big Rapids, MI, March 9, 2007

We are experiencing an era of unprecedented change. The dramatic changes and challenges in individual and collective life during that last several decades resulting from the exponential growth of knowledge, communication, technology, information and discoveries is advancing at an ever accelerating pace. Old solutions to our new problems and realities are found wanting, even counterproductive. All areas of human endeavor are being brought under question. Previous wisdom and practice becomes current misconceptions and anachronisms. It appears that the remedies we are applying to the perceived diseases are not bringing about the desired effect.

Diagnosing the Disease

Modern humanity has increasingly come to believe and accept that happiness and well-being are primarily based upon material conditions, such as physical health and wealth. This materialistic worldview is new to the world consciousness, largely supplanting a view based on religious and spiritual conceptions of reality. This new worldview, largely developed in the West has spread around the world overwhelming and marginalizing systems of thought and being that have been dominant in human affairs for centuries. Materialistic ideologies, which have promised peace, contentment and prosperity for all, are more and more being challenged for their failure to deliver on their promises.

These materialistic ideologies in their various forms such as socialism, communism and capitalism did lead to great prosperity for a very small minority of humanity, but also to desperation and a growing sense of hopelessness for the large majority. Communism has largely been discredited after eighty years of dominating the lives of much of the world's population. Capitalism, even in the chief remaining citadel of communism/socialism in the world, China, has emerged as the undisputed dominant economic system of the world. As the general material and economic wealth in the world increases, so does the gap between the wealthy and the poor. Not only have these materialistic philosophies failed to cure the problems that beset humanity, they have also contributed to a breakdown in moral and social life as can be seen in the growing problems in families, communities and educational systems.

Our modern materialistic culture has elevated vices to the level of virtues--greed becomes good, selfishness is considered natural and needed for success, lies are excused as service to the recipients, lust as love, war as peace and perversion legitimized as a human right. The advancement of civilization that we have struggled to develop over centuries is forgotten as we glorify our lower impulses and physical passions.

Humanity is sick and its sickness is waxing. The prescriptions given seem to make some symptoms better, but the malady continues. Though the body continues to grow overall, some parts are over enlarged while other substantial parts wither away. The heart seems weakened and the spirit depressed and hopeless. Focusing on the separate physical parts of the body, while neglecting the spiritual and moral aspects of the person, only deepens the sense of hopelessness and depression. The whole person is in need of holistic treatment. Recognition of the vital role mental and spiritual health play in overall well-being needs to be accounted for.

The materialistic remedies given thus far have been unable to effectively respond to the crises they face. We are in need of basic human principles and values by which to live our lives rather than the shortsighted and short-term fixes that have been prescribed by limited, ignorant and often self-serving diagnosticians. The many self-appointed physicians to education have also failed to discover the cause of the disease and to prescribe a remedy appropriate to the conditions and the time.

Role of Education

As schools and colleges are embedded in and part of larger societies and communities, they are affected and afflicted by similar problems. For example, the conflict, competition, disunity, materialism, injustice, apathy, violence, prejudice and other misguided and out-dated values and patterns that undermine human welfare and create instability in the greater society are also found in our educational institutions.

Sometimes education's shortcomings are blamed as the progenitors of society's ills. It is true that education can be a vehicle for cultivating both positive and negative values. It can uplift humanity and human rights or be the battleground for their destruction. More often than not, education reflects the values of the society in which it is based, though it can provide alternative models of knowing, feeling and acting. It can also promote or undermine the physical, social, mental and moral well-being of the individual and society.

Education has not kept pace with the changes that constitute a global transformation. Both high and low alike are challenging its practices around the planet. Leading thinkers, governments and the common people all want more from their educational institutions. Even the higher educational institutions, which we once held sacrosanct, are being questioned as to their mission and value. Norms, like quality and integrity, that once commanded respect are perceived as dated. The answers to deeper searches for meaning and value are being sought.

The educational institutions and the educators within them can attempt to overthrow and transcend the unjust and harmful patterns inherent in a decaying system. They can attempt to create loving, honest and just classrooms and instruction. By rejecting outmoded views and prejudiced thinking, they can facilitate the transformation of their students thinking, attitudes and behavior and in turn be a positive influence on the

societies of which they are a part. Those these are piecemeal remedies, they can contribute to the overall well-being of society.

Prescribing a Remedy: Developing Healing Capabilities of Mind, Heart and Will

The higher qualities of mind, heart and will along with their inherent standards of truth, love and service are recommended as the primary tools to diagnose the disease and prescribe the remedy needed in education in this present day. Educators can use these forces to develop healthy attitudes and perceptions in their students. They can help students identify examples of these principles in their daily lives and studies; point out how dishonesty, injustice and hatred have been and are destructive; and provide ways to overcome their influence. Since truth, love and service are the building blocks of individual and collective development, education can help students recognize their personal and social implications of these human values in their individual and collective lives.

Capabilities of the mind: knowing and truth

One of the greatest challenges of the mind is overcoming the limitations imposed by the ego. The ego is that conscious sense of self which is necessary for proper development. The ego in this sense is an unwarranted or exaggerated sense of our individual importance strengthened by a feeling of superiority. The ego will inflate and over estimate its strengths and fail to recognize its weaknesses. This inaccurate assessment of self leads to a failure to grow and to relate accurately with others and the environment.

One of the sicknesses of our current culture and educational system is its failure to help individuals moderate their egos and truthfully know themselves. For the egocentric person strengths are exaggerated and weaknesses are under estimated or ignored. What is understood about right and wrong is not put in proper perspective. If an egocentric orientation is not superseded by a broader world view troubles will ensue.

Connected with the problem of having a healthy ego perspective, is a general failure to reflect or think deeply about the problems we face individually and collectively. We lack a clear historical, scientific and moral perspective or sense of purpose in which to frame the happenings of our world. Being constrained by our egos, we lack the perspective outside of our limited worldviews that place us at the center of what we image truth, love and service to be. We are unable to objectively assess the world and the role we should play in it. Therefore our solutions tend to be self centered and neglect a major part of our environment that affects us, though we may remain ignorant of that effect.

As truth is the watchword for the realm of the mind, we must be ever and systematically expanding our frameworks of truth, and schools must become the primary vehicles for facilitating that process. Consultation that fully, frankly and freely investigates the truth from all angles is a potent instrument in the search for truth for both individuals and groups.

An appreciation and understanding of the essential oneness of humankind is an organizing concept and a necessary prelude to working for human rights.

Capabilities of the heart: feeling and love

Love is an attraction to beauty, but a sense of beauty needs to be developed. The sense of love and beauty can be perverted or limited. Teachers and parents must help their charges to overcome the lower attractions and passion of the body and ego by raising their sights to loftier visions and creative actions and behaviors. Building an ever-widening appreciation of diversity and its role in lending beauty to the whole is a process that allows the sense of love and beauty to harmonize all that is good in our world. We can help learners to increase those things that conform to the principle of love and beauty, and therefore to develop the capabilities of their hearts.

In the realm of the heart, love is the vital force for health. Love should characterize individual and collective thought and action. Love is a basis for happiness. Learning what and how to love is essential for well being. Love and happiness breed further development of the heart. Teachers can encourage these capacities in their students and their classrooms, as can principals in their schools and superintendents and school boards in their districts.

Capabilities of the will: acting and service

Overcoming the limitations of our egos, coming to know ourselves and developing a healthy love for others and beauty sets the stage for service. As we begin to widen our sphere of service from a limited egocentric perspective of ourselves to an ethnocentric one related to our communities, and, then hopefully, to a world centric view point, our sense of purpose and our capacities are called upon to correspondingly widen.

Our willpower becomes stronger, more focused, disciplined and developed through service. In this state, our capability for creativity increases along with our capacity for initiative and perseverance. Combined with and guided by the principles of truth and love, the values and capacities of the mind and heart, we can better serve ourselves and others. Taken together these three forces of truth, love and service are potent in overcoming the problems facing individuals and communities, both inside and outside of educational institutions.

Individuals and the communities in which they live are deeply interconnected. We affect our environments and they affect us. Interactions help us develop who we are and who we become, and who we are and what we become impact our society. By working together in groups with these forces we are able to refine these forces in ourselves and overcome the limitations imposed by our lower natures and earlier environments.

Truth, Love and Service

Truth, love and service are initially understood from an individual egocentric standpoint, and our individual capabilities are manifested and understood from that limited perspective. As we mature we learn to take the perspective of others. When truth, love and service are viewed only through our egocentric or ethnocentric perspectives, we fail to appreciate why those outside of ourselves or our immediate groups with whom we identify and who may not benefit or even be harmed by our limited interpretation, would take offence with our narrow frame of reference.

Through cooperation, consultation, collaboration and commitment, we empower others and ourselves to heal our communities. Through such tools, we can facilitate greater truth, love and service in our classrooms and learning. Working together in community increases capacity for knowing, loving and serving. Schools are ideal places for this learning to occur. In schools, we can learn how to do these things.

The shrinking of the world as a group of disparate and largely separate nations into a world order increasingly characterized as a global village requires the cooperation and interdependence of all nations and peoples. A consciousness of the oneness of humankind will be formed from our increased contact and interchange with diverse peoples with diverse thoughts, attitudes and lives.

Though we appear different on the surface, there is a basic core that transcends culture and place. All people desire similar things and share similar capacities. As we develop our appreciation for the value of unity in diversity and reciprocity, we heal ourselves and our world.

Conclusion

Modern thinkers chiefly identify development with materialistic and economic factors. Education is often measured and evaluated by the same standard: its material and economic impact on the individual and society. A moral balance is recommended to this excessively materialistic perspective. It is extremely difficult to unravel the complexities of the social and educational systems in these changing times to show how they can contribute to the solutions, rather than contribute to the problems.

Society's advancement depends upon unity, which in turn requires truth, love and service as a foundation. So do the educational systems. Yet we find both filled with hatred, prejudice, greed and oppression that lead to a breakdown of institutions and systems and greatly hamper individual growth. Both schools and colleges suffer from these afflictions, and prescriptions given by outsiders have often left them further weakened and hopeless.

Educational institutions are both blamed for the troubles and looked to for solutions for the many problems that beset humankind. They can be potent forces to convey and shape culture and beliefs and can develop human potentialities to contribute to the well-being of individuals and their communities. Educational programs can develop the values, morals, qualities and capabilities for constructive individual and collective behavior such as love, truth, humility, kindness, tolerance and justice. Educational institutions should be the

seedbed for learning about just and harmonious communities. In this process, the rights of the individual and the society should be balanced for the benefit of both.

The world can be compared to a human body, the most complex organism we know of in the universe. Of the body, the brain itself is the most complex and astounding creation, even more so than the physical universe itself. The body is made up of diverse parts that need to work together as a unified whole to be healthy. It also needs to be guided by meaning and purpose.

Once freed from the limitations that our various traditions have imposed upon us, we can begin to realize more of our potential for growth and development. We can begin to build the necessary relationships upon which a healthy community and world are based. We can begin to rewrite our futures. We can find the hope and inspiration for which our minds, hearts and wills yearn. We can become empowered to build that future, one day and one classroom at a time.

Our learning takes on a meaning and power that can transform our own minds, hearts and wills and those with whom we come into contact. In this way we can build a healthier world, by doing our part and making the education systems, whether it is a classroom, school or larger system more healthy. Our service as educators can change the world, but only if we take the responsibility to do so. The more clearly we can perceive the disease, the more likely we will be able to apply and effective remedy.

Notes

Parts of this paper were adapted from or influenced by the following:

1. Joint Non-Governmental Organization to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva on 23 April 1996 on Agenda item 20(a): Status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child
2. Nancy Campbell Collegiate Institute Nineteen Leadership Capabilities.
3. *One Common Faith*, commissioned by the Universal House of Justice.
4. The Bahá'í writings.